

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

STRATEGIES FOR SOLVING SOCIAL PROBLEMS



PRESENTED BY
Solutions Journalism Network
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IN ASSOCIATION WITH
The Transformative Action Institute
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MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Classroom activities for understanding social change



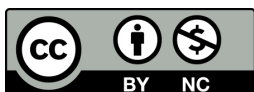
Do you want to...

- Introduce your students to the vast and complex world of social change with real-life examples of how people and organizations are working to make the world a better place?
- Teach them effective problem-solving strategies that will help them as students and in their future professions?
- Shift their perspective from a problem mindset to a solutions mindset?

You've come to the right place! Our Making a Difference: Strategies for Solving Social Problems course modules are based on a semester-long, undergraduate-level course developed and taught by Scott Sherman of the [Transformative Action Institute](#) (TAI). SJN has adapted his exemplary work into an introductory trio of modules to help educators orient their students toward a critical, yet productive stance on tackling social change:

- [Part One: Shifting the Focus to Solutions](#) will introduce students to the implications of a problem-centric worldview and help them re-orient to solutions thinking.
- [Part Two: Measuring and Maximizing Impact](#) teaches students how to distinguish between outputs and outcomes and identify social change programs that are supported by strong evidence of success.
- [Part Three: Discovering What Works](#) examines prizes and rapid results challenges as motivating factors for discovering the best solutions for social problems.

Each module includes discussion prompts, in-class activities, and links to relevant SJN story collections. The Making a Difference modules are based on SJN's in-house [Success Factor](#) taxonomy, a framework for understanding the tactics that are crucial to the success or failure of a given social change initiative. Our mission at Solutions Journalism Network is to spread the practice of solutions journalism: rigorous reporting on responses to social problems. We seek to rebalance the news, so that every day people are exposed to stories that help them understand problems and challenges, and stories that show potential ways to respond. Our work with educators and community leaders is designed to creatively engage learners with the challenge of solving complex social challenges in their own communities. These materials are available for educational use under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) license.



MEASURING AND MAXIMIZING IMPACT

Certain challenges are endemic to all forms of social entrepreneurship; impact measurement and evaluation is one of these big challenges.

Sometimes what seems like a great idea to solve a social or environmental problem fails—or worse, it does more harm than good. How do we know whether a program really works? How do we differentiate between programs that are backed up with strong evidence, as opposed to the ones that just have great publicity? What kinds of evidence do we need to see? How do we differentiate between outputs and actual outcomes? How do we know if something is really making an impact?

- Anne Connor’s story about the ecological damages caused by road salts uses specific dollar amounts to demonstrate financial damages and cites percentages of lakes affected by chemical imbalances to show the scope and impact of the issue.
- Jeff Grabmeier cites a published political experiment to draw conclusions about the public’s preferences for town halls and democratic action.
- Eva Fedderly’s story about a New Orleans charter school relies heavily on individual testimony and case studies.
- Damian Carrington’s article about housecats’ impact on local ecosystem combines population facts and a variety of experimental methodologies.

Discussion: Measuring Impact

Time: 40 minutes (depending on student knowledge levels)

Materials: Students need to have read the stories for today from the [Measuring Impact](#) collection

Step One: The five stories in the Measuring Impact collection all offer promising solutions, but how do we know whether these programs really work?

Begin your discussion with these questions:

- What kinds of evidence do we usually expect to see (data, expertise, case studies, anecdotes, experiments...) in news media?
- How do we know whether or not an intervention was successful? Often a program might sound great, but it doesn’t actually succeed.

Step Two: Work with your students to identify and list the types of evidence used in these stories. For example:

Discuss these stories in detail. How do we know whether a program really works? What kinds of evidence do we need to see? Often a program might sound great, but it doesn’t actually succeed.

Step Three: after the students have discussed how the articles are using evidence, introduce the crucial difference between outputs and outcomes. It’s impressive to say a program has served 4 million young adults. But just because it has served so many people, is this evidence of real impact? How do we know whether it’s truly making a difference? What are the actual outcomes – the changes we wish to see in the world? (cont. on next page)

MEASURING AND MAXIMIZING IMPACT

Discussion (CONTINUED):

This is an essential question to ask; with a seemingly endless array of nonprofits and governmental initiatives working in fields of social change, differentiating between the ones that are backed up with strong evidence and the ones that just have great public relations can be the secret to finding and investing in a successful solution.

Step Four: ask the students how we might measure impact. What kinds of evidence would we need to test whether a program actually works? They might come up with a number of theories. For each one of these, you can discuss the pros and cons.

- Randomized, controlled trials. A double-blind RCT with experimental and control groups in the gold-standard of scientific research, but they are difficult and resource-intensive, and often simply not a feasible or appropriate way to assess lived, subjective experiences.
- Testimonials, anecdotes, and case studies. Nonprofits often shine a light on an inspirational success story from their program, but these stories are not necessarily representative of the entire population they serve, nor does the success have a proven relationship to the program. An educational initiative, for example, might take credit for having award-winning graduates, but perhaps the students already had the skills, talent, hard work, and motivation to succeed; we can't know for sure that it was the educational program that led them to their success.
- Self-reports. A self-report is any method which involves asking a participant about their feelings, attitudes, beliefs and so on, such as questionnaires and interviews. A self-report can be effective, but again, they are subject to biases. People often believe themselves to be smarter, better, and more competent than others, so self-reports in surveys might not be accurate or properly correlated with real-life behaviors. Someone could report themselves as likely to take action to make the world a better place, but in reality, they don't do anything at all.

This discussion can continue for as long as you wish. Engage the students in analyzing other ways that they can measure the impact of an initiative. When you are ready, you can move on to the next activity: Having the students attempt to assess the impact of popular, well-funded nonprofit ventures

MEASURING AND MAXIMIZING IMPACT

How do we know if something is really making an impact? This unit looks at how to measure the effectiveness of an intervention. We will begin by discussing what kind of evidence is necessary to judge whether a nonprofit or governmental program is truly making a difference.

This first activity capitalizes on the human love of mystery. The premise here is similar to the popular game, “Two Truths and a Lie.” In this game, people tell three statements about their lives; as the title alludes, two statements are true and one is false. Listeners must guess which one is the lie.

We’re going to do the same thing here with solutions to social problems. Many nonprofit organizations that sound wonderful, but how many of them have programs that actually work?

Activity One: The Mystery

Time: 20 minutes

Materials: None

Step One: tell the students about the following three nonprofit organizations, each of which has received at least tens of millions of dollars in funding. (Some have received more than one billion dollars of funding). At least one of them actually does not work.

- In order to prevent youth from getting involved in crime, one program takes them to prisons, and attempts to scare them. Prisoners offer testimony about how terrible their lives are behind bars. They tell frightening stories and offer a grim picture of what happens to people who commit crimes and are caught. The theory of change is that the young people will be “scared straight.” This program was so compelling that there was an Academy-Award winning documentary about its effectiveness.
- Another program, Project DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education), is intended to show young people the dangers of drugs. Police officers teach young people in high schools about how drugs can destroy their lives.
- One of the major problems in the world is lack of access to safe, clean drinking water. A social entrepreneur came up with a clever idea: He would create merry-go-rounds that children could play on, and as they turned, would pump water from the ground! These PlayPumps started to spread throughout many developing nations, and earned the support of billionaire philanthropists, as well as both Democrats and Republicans. Both the Bushes and the Clintons praised and promoted it. It was one of those rare programs that earned bipartisan support for being such an innovative solution to a seemingly intractable problem.

MEASURING AND MAXIMIZING IMPACT

Activity One (cont.): The Mystery

Step Two: after hearing about the three organizations, the students will have to vote on which one they think is built on a shaky foundation. In other words, there is little to no evidence of impact. Let the students debate in small groups for 10 minutes about which one they think doesn't work and why not. Then let them vote on each option.

Step Three: reveal the results. Studies of Scared Straight indicate that students who go through the program are actually more likely to end up in prison than other randomly selected young people who don't go through the program!

Ask the students why they think this is true – why the program is ineffective, and why it actually seems to make the problem worse. One of the leading theories is because it labels young people with the identity as “bad kids.” If they are being sent to this program in jails, they begin to see themselves as the type of at-risk youth who is destined for a life of crime. Another theory is that it puts them in peer groups of other young people who are labeled “at-risk.” Finally, some people suggest that the young people think that the conditions in prison aren't so bad, or that this could never happen to them.

Now, surprise the students by revealing that the second program, Project DARE, also does not work. Similar to Scared Straight, it received scathing reviews in studies showing that young people who were randomly selected to go through this anti-drug program were more likely to use and abuse drugs than other randomly selected students.

Again, you can ask the students why they think this might be. A few major theories are that young people are rebellious against authority. If a cop says that something is bad, it becomes more tempting; moreover, the program might expose young people to drugs that they never knew about before.

Finally (you probably know where this is going), reveal that the third program also was a spectacular failure, despite the many millions of dollars showered upon it. In most places, children stopped using the PlayPumps. They didn't find them to be very fun. And often the PlayPumps broke, and nobody knew how to repair them.

Step Four: debrief. Did any students suspect that all three efforts were failures? The key takeaway here is that often, a program may seem like it will have a great impact. But in real life, when we measure it, we find that it doesn't actually work.

Note: this activity will work with a variety of other examples! Explore with customizing the exercise more specifically to your course topic.

Making a Difference: Part Two

MEASURING AND MAXIMIZING IMPACT

The most successful innovators know that the best way to see if your theory of change is correct is to test it out in the real world, as soon and as often as possible.

You will never know if your plans really will succeed if you spend all your time conceptualizing. You need to test it out again and again, with what author Peter Sims calls “little bets.” These aren’t expensive tests where a failure will end in catastrophe. They are small attempts to test one part of your model. Sims uses stand-up comedy as an example. When we see polished comedy specials on Netflix, it is easy to fall into a pattern of thinking that it is easy for such comics to create genius content. What we don’t see are the little bets; the months of experimenting at comedy clubs, testing hundreds of jokes and comedy routines to see which ones fall flat and which ones succeed. Only the best parts of these routines end up in the televised final product.

Activity:

The Marshmallow Challenge: maximizing impact through trial-and-error

Time: 40 minutes

Materials: Marshmallows spaghetti sticks, scotch tape, string, scissors, measuring tape.

Step One: divide the room into teams of four, if possible. Every team should get one marshmallow, one pair of scissors, 20 spaghetti sticks, a meter of tape, and a meter of string.

Step Two: tell everyone that they have 18 minutes to build the tallest possible free-standing structure, using only the ingredients that have been given to them. There are a few rules:

1. The marshmallow has to be on the top of the structure. In other words, they can’t put the marshmallow on the bottom, as the base of their creation.
2. They can’t tear up the marshmallow into smaller sizes. They have to use the full marshmallow. They can however cut up/break the spaghetti sticks, the tape, or the string, if they wish.
3. They can’t tape the structure to the wall or tie a string to hold it up. It must stand on its own at the end of 18 minutes.

Step Three: begin the countdown. Provide verbal updates on the amount of time remaining.

Step Four: at the end of 18 minutes, call time. Everyone must cease working on their structures. Measure the height of each one that is still standing. Often, none of the structures stand - they all collapse at the end of 18 minutes when everyone stops working! This is an important part of the debrief. If any structures remain standing, measure to determine the tallest and announce the winner.

Step Five: debrief. Begin by asking what went wrong, especially for groups who failed to get the structure to stand at all. Why weren’t they able to solve this challenge? Some may mention the scarcity of time and resources, and the stress and pressure. After some discussion, ask them to guess which kind of people consistently build the tallest structures during this challenge? They may make a few guesses, but the correct answer is young children in kindergarten! They consistently outperform students at Harvard Business School, as well as students in other prestigious schools, and other intelligent adults in the working world.

Making a Difference: Part Two

MEASURING AND MAXIMIZING IMPACT

Activity (cont.):

The Marshmallow Challenge: maximizing impact through trial-and-error

Why do kindergarteners outperform Ivy League students when given this task?

Let the students attempt to come up with their own answers. Here are some that you can contribute if nobody else comes up with them: It turns out that adults tend to spend much of their time planning and designing. This is normally helpful, but it backfires if some of the assumptions are wrong. For example, most adults assume that a marshmallow is fairly light, because it seems so fluffy and insubstantial. But when they place the marshmallow on top of a tower made out of spaghetti sticks at the end of 18 minutes, they see that the entire tower topples over!

Young children, by contrast, will just start building their structures – iterating right away. They might discover in the first minute that the marshmallow is heavy. Therefore, they will try a second attempt, and a third attempt, right away; they are constantly learning from their mistakes.

This is valuable in that it gets to the main idea of social innovation. The best way to see if your theory of change is correct is to test it out in the real world. Of the great entrepreneurial success stories have only come out of the wreckage of countless failures that we never see. For instance, Howard Schultz, the CEO of Starbucks, had many initial tests for his coffeehouse, which were disasters. Originally, he had opera music in all the earliest pilots of Starbucks; he wanted it to be as Italian as possible. But customers didn't like it at all, so he ditched it. Similarly, he also had waiters in tuxedos at the early coffeehouses. Again, this was a failed test that never made it. But he could never have been successful if he hadn't tested out a lot of different variations to see what would work best. This is why it's so important to try so many attempts.

Thus, you can conclude class today by summing up the main point: To create the greatest good and the maximum positive impact, we need to have a lot of trials and experiments.